

Essay

A Dying Art: The Classy Exit Line

unt, from which the personage could issue one last dramatic utterance, full of the compacted significance of his life. Last words were to sound as if all of the individual's earthly time had been sharpened to that point: he could now etch the grand summation. "More light" the great Goethe of the Enlightenment is said to have cried as he expired. There is some opinion, however, that what he actually said was "Little wife, give me your little paw."

In any case, the genre of great last words died quite a few years ago. There are those who think the last genuinely memorable last words were spoken in 1900, when, according to one version, the dying Oscar Wilde said, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."

Others set the date in 1904, when Chekhov on his deathbed declared, "It's a long time since I drank champagne." Appropriately, his coffin then rode to burial in a freight car marked FRESH OYSTERS.

Only now and then does one catch a handsome exit line today. Gary Gilmore, the murderer executed in Ulah in 1971.

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Last words are a matter of taste, of course, and judgments coabout them tend to be subjective. A strong though eccentric was case might be made for the final utterance of Britain's Lord special strength of the final utterance of Britain's Lord special sp

out of his coma long enough to observe, "John Rogers* did!" Then he slipped away.

The great last words traditionally included in anthologies have usually been more serious than that, and often sound suspiciously perfect. Le style, c'est l'homme. General Robert E. Lee is said to have gone in 1870 with just the right military-metaphysical command: "Strike the tent!" The great 18th century classicist and prig Nicolas Boileau managed a sentence of wonderfully plump self-congratulation: "It is a conso*An English Protestant divine burned at the stake for heresy in 1555.

say during the battle of Spotsylvania Court House, "Why, they couldn't hit an elephant at this dist—" But premeditated last words—the deathbed equivalent of Neil Armstrong's "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," the canned speech uttered when setting off for other worlds—have a Shake-spearean grandiloquence about them.

Last words are not a congenial form of theater any more. Suitable stages no longer seem to be available for such death scenes, nor is there much inclination to witness them. People tend either to die suddenly, unexpectedly, without the necessary editorial preparation, or to expire in hospitals, under sedation and probably not during visiting hours. The sedative dusk descends hours or days before the last darkness.

Perhaps the demise of great last words has something to do with a decline in the 20th century of the augustness of death. The departure of a single soul was once an impossing occasion. An age of holocausts is less disposed to hear the individual goodbyes.

Perhaps some entrepreneur will try to revive the genre of last words by enlisting videotape, a newer form of theater. Customers could write their own final script—or choose appropriate last words from the company's handsome selection ("Pick the

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